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## **Bring a Plate: Facilitating experimentation in The Welcome Dinner Project**

Rick Flowers and Elaine Swan

### **Introduction**

Much of the extant migrant and refugee adult education literature examines the types of learning needed by, or offered to, *arrivals* to help them settle into a new country (Shan 2015, Morrice 2011, Sprung 2013). There is little research about the types of adult education needed by *host communities* to help them learn ways to welcome new arrivals. This research gap becomes all the more significant when one considers that Australian NGOs offer a gamut of initiatives which aim to educate local residents about migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, international students and the challenges facing them. Examples include *Refugee Week*, *Diversity Works Programme*, and *Harmony Day*. Many of these deploy the sharing of food as a pedagogical strategy, a key part of inter-cultural education curricula (Flowers and Swan 2012, 2015). Critiqued for tokenism and superficiality, and glossed in Australia as 'spaghetti and polka', these forms of public pedagogy by community-based organisations place great store in the power of sharing food to produce connection (Hilbers 2012). To date, however, little attention has been given to how sharing food operates pedagogically (Flowers and Swan 2018). This matters because sharing food as an intercultural strategy seesaws between being denigrated or celebrated, with little research on how it is practised as a pedagogical approach.

Accordingly, in this paper, drawing on empirical research over a three-year period, we examine *The Welcome Dinner Project* (WDP). As its handbook claims, the WDP aims to bring together ‘newly arrived’ people and ‘established Australians’ to meet and ‘share stories’ over a potluck meal in ‘the comfort of their own home.’ The purpose is to create meaningful connections, new friendships and social solidarities between people living near to each other. The category ‘new arrivals’ refers to migrants, refugees or international students. Established in Sydney in 2013, the project has rapidly spread to major cities across Australia, having recruited more than 5,000 volunteers and participants, and trained over 300 volunteers to facilitate WDP lunches and dinners. It receives glowing reports in the media at a time of intense racist media reporting towards migrants and refugees and the resurgence of white supremacist anti-immigration politics in Australia.

Sponsored by local councils, the WDP also runs lunch events in community venues and not homes. The WDP, however, sees the home dinners as their priority, being more effective because of their taking place in the intimacy of the home and these are the focus for this paper. Volunteer facilitators lead the events and the WDP requires them to participate in a full-day training course, and attend other workshops, designed and convened by the founder of the WDP, Penny Elsley. The facilitators host the events and run activities during the potluck, including asking people to introduce their dish by sharing stories about the food they have brought.

The WDP forms part of an emerging international movement of food social enterprises and NGOs which perform what we call ‘food hospitality activism.’ By this we mean, how NGOs and social enterprises try to facilitate connections between people of different racial backgrounds through food and hospitality, as a means to address

social injustice and racism experienced by refugees, asylum seekers and racialised migrants, and to educate citizens about new arrivals.

Our aim is not to analyse the learning outcomes or effects of the project but rather to discuss the design and meaning of facilitated activities in the micro-contexts of the dinners. As a form of ‘designed everyday multiculturalism,’ focused on welcoming new arrivals to Australia, the dinner takes skill and labour. Thus, facilitators lead activities that are imagined to lubricate social dynamics and relations, and produce convivial and commensal affects and behaviours. Drawing on theories of training activities as ‘experimentations’ – cognitive, embodied and emotional - which enable new knowledge practices and social relations, we analyse how ritualised activities around the potluck dinner are planned and facilitated.

Our analytic framework draws on theorising about encounters with difference (Ahmed 2004, Valentine 2008); structures of commensality, hospitality and the potluck (Beeman 2014, Julier 2013, Douglas 1997); and everyday multiculturalism (Shan and Walther 2015, Wise 2011, Wise and Velayutham 2014). Furthermore, we draw on research by cultural geographers and social anthropologists that theorise outdoor and diversity training as forms of social experimentation (Wilson 2013, Hinchcliffe 2000, Martin 1994). In so doing, we contribute to research about how adult education responds to the challenges of building social solidarities with migrants through a learning approach to multiculturalism. In the words of Hongxia Shan and Pierre Walther ‘while studies of everyday multiculturalism have uncovered various dimensions of related practices, rarely have researchers taken - a learning perspective toward multicultural practices’ (2015, p. 20). In particular, we do this by focusing on the training of facilitators, and their facilitation of new and established Australians, building on Annette Sprung’s (2013) call to promote education for the ‘majority’ so that

racialised social structures and inequalities are transformed. In particular, we offer new ways to understand under-theorised but commonplace adult education activities in the context of formal and informal learning across difference. More specifically, we do this by conceptualising WDP activities as forms of experimentation, and we extend scholarship about the non-human in adult education to foreground food, which has been relatively ignored to date (Fenwick, Edwards and Sawchuk 2015; Shan 2015).

The paper has six sections. We introduce the WDP, followed by a description of the policy and political context for migrants, refugees and international students in Australia. Our literature review focuses on anthropological and geographical studies of training activities, and literature on encounters with difference. After an outline of our methodology, we present fieldnotes, interview data and our analyses of the dinner events.

### **The Welcome Dinner**

The WDP was established by Penny Elsley, the founder and an ex-teacher and a community worker with experience of working with asylum seekers and refugees on a paid and volunteer basis. In the media and WDP training workshops, she provides three reasons for doing so: First, she relays her own experience of hospitality given by poor women in India. Secondly, recently arrived migrants told Penny that they had not yet been in the home of a local Australian. Thirdly, Penny explains that Australian friends and colleagues wished to meet refugees. Underpinning this, her rationale is that most people in Australia feel alienated and the WDP can be one part in connecting people. She, and volunteers also see the project as countering racism towards newly arrived Australians. In essence, the WDP's espoused aim is to bring together 'newly arrived people and established Australians to meet over dinner conversation in the comfort of

their own home' (WDP Handbook). The WDP publicity explains that 'people come together across cultures over a shared meal' a means through which 'strangers... become friends'. The project aims include:

To create a platform for meaningful connection, sparking friendships between people of diverse cultures who are living in close proximity to one another in communities throughout Australia.

The project's purpose is to facilitate connections between people through food. The handbook explains:

The mix of food, conversation and the opportunity to try something new, creates a perfect recipe for connection and rediscovery of our common humanity.

After each dinner, it is hoped that everyone will 'exchange contacts and stay in touch.' A central part of its philosophy is that the dinner events benefit established, as much as newly arrived, Australians because they too suffer from social isolation.

The WDP was launched in 2013, and since then over 200 dinners have been held in homes and community spaces across Australia. The WDP is run by volunteers. Funding is sporadic, small amounts raised through crowd-funding, and to date only two State governments have given grants. Local government councils have provided in-kind support.

For the WDP, 'established Australians' refers to anyone who has lived in Australia for over ten years and the category 'newly arrived Australians' covers international students, migrants, asylum seekers and refugees who have been in Australia for ten years or fewer. The WDP facilitators and hosts come from a variety of professional backgrounds including community workers, lawyers, IT workers, teachers and retirees. Most are young women and of white Anglo-Celtic Australian backgrounds but others are from black British, Asian-Australian, Middle-Eastern Australian and

Asian migrant heritage, including hosts some of whom are new arrivals themselves. At the dinners we attended, participants varied in age, gender and worked in a variety of sectors including education, refugee and migrant services, arts and culture, PR and beauty services. Newly arrived Australians included international students from the Philippines, Germany, USA and China; refugees from Iran, Afghanistan and Eastern Europe; and established Australian guests while mainly from white Anglo-Celtic backgrounds included also Chinese, Middle-Eastern and southern European Australian backgrounds.

### **Australian multiculturalism and racism**

Australia is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world (Ho and Jakubowicz 2016). But despite the history of transnational migration, and whilst multiculturalism is much vaunted in the 'selling' and marketing of Australia, there is a longstanding history of state sanctioned and political racism (Ho 2011). Australia has a long history of racist immigration policies, of not being welcoming, and continues to administer brutal detention practices, on and off-shore. The White Australia policy of 1901 racially excluded anyone not seen as White and European from migrating to Australia. 'The very presence of Asians was considered a blemish on the ideal image of the white island continent' (Ang 2000, p. xiii) and for many years, in the white imaginary there was a deeply embedded 'obvious and threatening otherness of Asians' (Perera 1999, p. 189). Whilst racisms towards Aboriginal and Asian Australians continues, intense racist fears and hatred are now levelled at Arabic and Muslim Australians, new and established, with moral panics intensifying after the attack on the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001 and the Cronulla race riots at a beach in Sydney in 2005 (Poynting et al. 2004, Dreher and Ho 2009, Ho 2011). Western Sydney

University's *Challenging Racism Program* found that 32 percent of the population had Islamophobic view of Muslims, compared to 3 per cent in 1998 (Itaoui and Dunn 2017).

The Australian government's asylum seeker policies have become some of the most draconian and securitised in the world with privatised offshore detention centres for people seeking refuge by boats and cruel exclusionary refugee and asylum seeker legislation (Pickering 2001). While there are NGOs (such as WDP) advocating for more support, the Australian government's track record towards refugees can best be described as harsh and uncompromising. There has been broad electoral support for ruling parties of different political persuasions to sustain policies where asylum seekers are kept in detention centres often for periods over three years, both onshore and offshore (Higgins 2014). While some wish to strengthen Australia's humanitarian assistance to refugees; politicians, media and general public call for stronger border protection measures, code-word for more stringent provisions for refugees (Phillips and Spinks 2013). Despite the fact that Australia's recent intake of refugees is small compared to other countries, there is vilification and moral panic about refugees and asylum seekers as a 'deviant population' in the 'quality' print media which circulates notions of the invading, racialised and diseased deviant (Pickering 2001). Right-wing commentators position asylum seekers as 'queue jumpers', threats to Australian security, and the supposedly homogenous culture and national values. State-sanctioned racism limits who can come, live and work in Australia. Labour market research shows that recent humanitarian arrivals are relegated to low paid jobs such as cleaning, aged care, meat-processing, and night security regardless of their qualifications, and there is systemic discrimination through non-recognition of qualifications (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007). Farida Fozdar and Lisa Hartley write that 'negativity towards refugees in particular is widespread, with up to 75 per cent of the population seeing them as a



threat' (2013, p. 130). As a result, racially minoritised migrants and refugees feel that they are not welcomed by the majority mainstream population and feel ambivalent about whether they belong in Australia.

The WDP draws attention not only to the situation facing refugees but also for international students, whom research shows two-thirds experience racism, isolation and intense loneliness (Graycar 2010; Sawir et al 2008). For the last decade, over 500,00 international students each year have come to Australia (Australian Government 2017). In addition to interacting with racist state structures and racism in universities, international students face racialised exploitation as casual workers and racist abuse on public transport (Nyland et al 2009; Dunn et al, 2011).

While there have been harsh policies and deeply embedded racism, 'among immigrant-receiving nations, Australia is unique in providing newly arrived immigrants and refugees with settlement and second-language programs that have been nationally funded' since 1949 (Burns and DeSilva Joyce 2007, p. 5). Through Australia's humanitarian assistance program NGOs get government funding to run settlement programs for those who enter the country as refugees and 'humanitarian' entrants, but not for skilled or business migrants.

The WDP does not provide settlement services or formal migrant adult education. In essence, it sees itself as about welcoming new arrivals, and educating established Australians about new arrivals, and bringing people together, to connect, have new conversations in a form of affective and social hospitality over food. Through its food hospitality activism, the WDP wants to show that established Australians desire to make new migrants feel at home and challenge negative perceptions. It also wants to educate established Australians how to welcome. The WDP provides a space and tightly

facilitated activities to enable established and newly arrived Australians to meet in ways which are seen to be ‘safe’ and hospitable.

Welcoming new arrivals to Australia is politically complicated on many fronts including its history of state racism and recent draconian asylum seeker policy but principally because Australia is a settler colony. Invaded by the British in 1788, Australia is a settler colony in which Indigenous people have been systematically murdered, dispossessed and disadvantaged, suffering higher levels of incarceration and deaths in custody than any other ‘ethnic’ group. This might mean that non-Aboriginal people are not in a position to welcome new arrivals. Indeed, there is a specific cultural protocol for public events where selected Aboriginal elders welcome non-Aboriginal people to a specific Aboriginal nation in Australia.

### **Micro-social experiments**

In this section we review literature that informed our analysis, focusing in particular on studies which conceptualise training activities and commensal practices as forms of experimentation. To date, scholarship on institutionalised migrant education focuses largely on the content and effects of curriculum, rather than a ‘learning perspective towards multicultural practices’ (Shan and Walther 2015, p. 20). Attention to the micro-practices of multicultural pedagogies can start to address this gap in adult education theorising. For instance, the growing subfield of studies of workplace and professional learning which draw on practice and socio-material theories have yet to analyse formal facilitation activities in any close-up way or outside of a pre-determined learning theory (for instance, the edited collection by Hager, Lee and Reich, 2012). In contrast, geography and anthropology scholars undertake ethnographic research on professional training courses, and focus with more attention on the detail of their ‘micro-contexts...

minute workings and techniques' (Wilson 2013, p. 74). These studies are more open in their analysis of facilitated exercises and activities, not reducing them to particular theories or classifications (Hinchcliffe 2000). We turn to these studies because they take training activities seriously as forms of social experiment, prising open their complex relations, analogies and operations (Martin 1994, Hinchcliffe 2000, Wainwright et al. 2010, Wilson 2013).

Two studies examine outdoor corporate training and argue that this form of organisational training uses activities and embodied learning to experiment with organisational hierarchical and gender relations. In an early influential study, anthropologist Emily Martin (1994) undertook an ethnography of a large-scale outdoors experiential course within a US company listed in Fortune 500, involving trust-building techniques with ropes. The purpose was to develop organisational and individual flexibility through risk-taking and to model physically the type of worker the corporations wanted to employ. Martin describes how activities involve participants walking tightropes and balancing on tall, narrow, wobbling poles in trees. People were encouraged to be active in taking risks: 'like the shifting poles, platforms, ropes and wire unmoored in space, the nature of the person itself is to shift and to be able to tolerate continuing shifts' (Martin 1994, p. 214). The trainers played around with role reversals, putting workers in charge of managers, and as a result, Martin argues that they experimented with the usual workplace boundaries and divisions between them in the exercises. In particular, she underlines how the outdoor rope exercises 'scrambled' the gendered characteristics culturally associated with men and women; with women leading, taking risks, being physically energetic.

Riffing off Martin's analysis, geographer Steve Hinchcliffe (2000) writes about a management-training outward-bound course in the UK. His argument is that the

outdoor exercises generated new forms of workplace experimentation, or what he calls 'experimental learning.' What he means by this is that the activities facilitated on the course were 'performances which bring about something new' (2000, p. 575). Hence, balancing on poles, climbing, abseiling, sensory deprivation, building rafts enabled 'corporeal experimentation.' Roleplay exercises disrupted workplace conventions and forms of embodiment and allowed people to play with usual working relations. The types of outdoor clothing people wore for the activities unsettled work identities and hierarchies and allowed people to get away from 'artefacts of rank.' In particular, the experiments related to new forms of organising in the corporate world around entrepreneurialism and risk-taking. Thus, the 'outdoors becomes an experimental classroom' in which workers are encouraged to experiment with reflexive, risk-taking, agile and active bodies (2000, p. 582). In summing up, he suggests the course is less about learning about workplaces or building rafts and more about developing non-cognitivist knowledge and corporeal experimentation. An important part of his arguments is the isomorphism between shifts in knowledge in social theory and management training. Thus, he suggests that social theory - such as feminism and social psychology - has moved away from traditional rational and disembodied epistemology which privileges cognition towards knowing as experiential, tacit, relational and embodied.

Martin and Hinchcliffe examine how training activities enable corporeal experiments with workplace relations and hierarchies in specific 'pedagogical spaces' (Shan and Walter 2015). Other scholars stress the influence of spaces of training or the 'geographies of encounter' and focus on experiments with the cognitive and affective (Wilson 2013, Wainwright et al. 2010). For example, Helen Wilson undertakes an ethnographic study of a diversity workshop run by an international not-for-profit

organisation; particularly relevant for our analysis as the workshop facilitates ‘encounters with difference’ and ‘prejudice reduction’ (2013, p. 73). Wilson’s premise is that in the UK’s economic and social context, ‘living with difference’ and ‘diversity related tensions’ (p. 73) are very pressing for individuals, organisations and policy makers, with the state and NGOs responding through an ‘array of strategies’ (p. 74) such as diversity training and community cohesion. Her focus is the range of exercises facilitated on the course which explore everyday violent micro-aggressions experienced by participants.

The course is a form of ‘managed contact’ to reconfigure prejudice with defined ‘conditions of conduct’ in how people should behave: for instance, confidentiality and respect (p. 74). Activities entailed ‘practices of embodied thought and critical reflection’ from which individuals can learn new knowledge practices around reducing their prejudice and effecting social change (p. 74). Exercises were designed to cultivate ‘experimentations in thought’ and affective intensities (p. 74). The cognitive experimentations enabled attendees to be ‘attentive to’ and ‘expand conscious thought’ (p. 78). But there was emotional experimentation too. Thus, activities involved first, people sharing their painful experiences of prejudice and secondly, reading out a list of their own prejudices. The latter generated uncomfortable emotions such as shame and embarrassment, confronted people with their prejudiced thinking habits, and encouraged them to develop new forms of thinking. Through feelings of embarrassment and discomfort, people bonded, and altered how they interact with each other.

The workshop created other means for experimentation and learning. People shared personal objects which facilitated connections between participants. Facilitators asked people to work in small groups to encourage intimacy and trust. In these ways,

the exercises produced ‘forms of attention and attachment’ in the group and ‘new ways of feeling’ (p. 74).

Wilson underlines the importance of the spatial environment which the facilitators designed to facilitate diversity and animate ‘attachment, encounter and intensity’ (p. 76). For instance, the facilitator’s handbook explained how to move furniture, organise games and icebreakers to shift the habits and the ‘emotional tonality’ of the space (Conradson 2003 cited in Wilson 2013, p. 76). Moreover, the facilitators’ embodiment, their gentle and challenging style enabled affective and experiential processes, ‘embodied comprehensions’ and a space for reflection and ‘suspension’ removed from everyday life. As a result of all of these micro-practices, attendees are encouraged to experiment with their ‘perception, interpretation and explanation’ (Connolly 2002 cited in Wilson 2013, p. 76). Whilst it could be argued that the course Wilson attended was more positive in its effects than many diversity courses, her analysis, nonetheless poses the question about whether the techniques and facilitation methods ‘resonate beyond the training events’ and could ever be scaled up by policy makers or NGOs seeking wider social change (p. 73).

Whilst these authors examine the facilitation and training activities which enabled experimentation, and managed formal training, other scholarship explores everyday unmanaged micro-social exchanges across difference through the concept of everyday multiculturalism. We turn to these ideas next, and in particular, those that focus on food, racial and cultural difference and experimentations.

### *Everyday multiculturalism*

Scholarship on everyday multiculturalism examines mundane, habitual, and quotidian intercultural encounters in urban public spaces. Everyday multiculturalism not only stands in contrast to managed or designed training encounters but also official policy

approaches to multiculturalism. Amanda Wise and Selvaraj Velayutham define the study of everyday multiculturalism as understanding how people 'inhabit' multiculturalism: 'the everyday practice and lived experience of diversity in specific situations and spaces of encounter' (2009, p. 3). Hence the focus is on studies of everyday ritual interactions and negotiations over difference in urban neighbourhood spaces, like shopping centres, public spaces, markets, public transport, schools, and workplaces. In these spaces, there is an 'everyday give and take' and 'mundane acts of reciprocity are the mechanism for negotiating difference' (Ho 2011, p. 604) extending from the exchange of care, information and goods; to neighbours sharing of vegetables and recipes (Wise 2011); or school children swapping lunches and gifts (Noble 2009). Although researchers focus on the micro-social encounter, they position these in a wider political, social and economic context (Chan and Walter 2015, Wise 2011).

Of particular significance for our analysis is that everyday multicultural encounters often centre on food exchange and consumption (Wise 2011). Food takes on this significance because it is so multifaceted being material, sensory, embodied, and symbolic of difference. But writing of food's status as a connector across difference, Wise notes that commensal practices can be a site for 'low-level cosmopolitanism' but also 'cultural anxiety and disjuncture... disgust and desire' (2011, p. 82). Hence, her project is to interrogate intercultural food sharing scenarios to identify which conditions enable positive experiments with culinary and cultural difference rather than disconnection, alienation or racism (2011, p. 84).

Experimenting with eating the Other's food can generate strong feelings because it is taken into the body and thus can be a threat or transgression. Hence, hospitality can feel precarious, dangerous, threatening or anxiety provoking. For instance, Ben Highmore suggests that in cultural culinary experimentation, we encounter new 'not me

worlds' which engender pleasurable feelings but also aggression and fear (cited in Wise 2011, p. 90). On the positive side, sharing food across racial and cultural difference can produce embodied connections and contribute to an appreciation of the Other in the community (Narayan 1997 cited in Wise 2011, p. 90).

Wise identifies several dimensions that shaped the affective encounter in such food experimentations: the social setting, materiality of consumption spaces, social rituals, the food itself and wider political context. In essence, it matters where, when and with whom you eat: with neighbours or workmates or with strangers; around a dining table or on a table in a mall. All these factors mediate the extent to which people respond and are transformed through encounters with racial and cultural difference. Food is the fulcrum. Wise insists that 'the sensuous qualities of food thread through all of these encounters, invoking, evoking, knitting together, incorporating, pushing apart, and re-habituating bodies along the way (Wise 2011, p. 85). Under some of these conditions, the sharing of food produces new forms of inter-subjective solidarity.

For instance, food sharing in a potluck commensal style – bring a plate in Australian argot – can engender transformative forms of exchange (Wise 2011). Hospitality practices such as sharing not only the food but also stories about where the food comes from, its cultural significance and the cultural biography of the giver can have positive impacts. The brought ethnic dish can suggest a gift of 'labour, otherness, and of me' (Wise 2011, p. 105). As a form of hospitality, the potluck style reinforces a sense of reciprocity. An integral part of sharing food is accommodating other people's preferences in the choice of dish made. At a sociality level, people can admire each other's cooking skills. Moreover, the guest/host role is blurred as everyone brings a dish. The ritualistic elements of such food experimentation across race and culture make a big difference in how people feel. Hence, 'it is order, ritual, hospitality, and



reciprocity which makes [food] safe or at least reduces the ambiguity and anxiety that can sometimes arise from encounters with difference' (Wise 2011, p. 101). The potluck meal not only enables the sharing of food and culture but corporeal experimentation as eating the Other's food 'incorporates hybrid others in a bodily way...[and] establishes a sense of 'we-ness' in difference (2011, p. 102). Elsewhere, Wise writes about more alienating and racist exchanges over food but we focus, in this paper, on the conditions which facilitate – especially rituals, reciprocity, food sharing and potluck – more 'managed' productive encounters, and which fit well with the WDP.

## **Methodology**

Our analysis arises from research we undertook between 2014 and 2017. Our fieldwork included interviews, participant-observation of a full-day workshop and a networking meeting for WDP facilitators, three 'home' and three 'community' dinners, and a full-day WDP Strategy Planning workshop. This was followed up by one-on-one interviews with 12 home dinner participants. At the dinner events we took dishes for the potluck; ate, drank and conversed with the other participants through the facilitated activities. We obtained ethics approval from our university and informed everyone before and at the start of the events that we would observe and take notes and photographs subject to their consent. Whilst we were eating and socialising, we made 'headnotes' and 'scratch-notes' and then wrote up more detailed fieldnotes at the end of each event, detailing our observations and noting our hunches, questions, and preliminary interpretations (Mason 2002). Our analysis drew on a repeated reading of our fieldnotes and interview transcripts, followed by successive stages of coding across the data. Our coding was both inductive and deductive, and we created 'in vivo', 'process' and literature informed codes.

In the next section, we draw on data drawn from our fieldnotes from the home dinners and the facilitator training workshop, and our interviews to provide background to the WDP dinners and a close reading of two of the facilitated activities, the potluck and the ‘introduce your dish’ activity.

## **Experiments**

The WDP convenes dinner events in ‘local homes.’ Hosts and participants register online, and from the WDP database a local co-ordinator selects and invites established Australians and new arrivals. Dinners run for two hours and this timing is strictly adhered to. An established or newly arrived Australian ‘hosts’ the event. The co-ordinator visits the host to vet their home and motivation before the event. The events are led by WDP trained facilitators. Prior to the event, a participant handbook and email are sent out which offer guidance about the event. The agenda includes a formal welcome, an acknowledgement of Indigenous Australian’s country (a protocol), host welcome and introduction to their home, an icebreaker, gathering round the food with each person explaining their dishes, eating, sharing feelings about the event, exchanging contact information, and a group photograph.

Like the diversity training course of which Wilson writes, the WDP event designs and facilitates an encounter with cultural and racial difference. Because it is tightly planned, the dinner is not like quotidian rituals of everyday multiculturalism, but more like the ‘bring a plate’ food sharing of which Wise writes. Its intention is in stark contrast to Wilson’s diversity workshop which seeks to surface shame and discomfort, because the dinner event aims to generate a sense of harmony and safety. The WDP facilitators’ handbooks offer practical guidance about how to behave, structure and time the event, arrange the space, and what to say. The WDP facilitators’ roleplayed the ‘minute workings and techniques’ of the event at their training (Wilson 2013, p. 74).

This guidance aims to create a welcoming atmosphere through its focus on order, care and safety. As the WDP founder explains at the training course for facilitators:

It's just a meal, people bringing a plate, pot luck meal...[But] it's quite intensive in terms of what it needs in facilitation. To make people safe to be able to come which is why people aren't having these pop-up dinners in the first place.

Like the diversity course, the WDP is 'managing contact in a particular spatial context' (Wilson 2013, p. 74) but its 'geography of encounter' is in someone's home. The home events are preferred as forms of encounter by the WDP because of the symbolic and affective significance of intercultural hospitality in the intimate space of the domestic sphere and its significance as a site of welcome and places of liminality (Beeman 2014). But traditional dinner party roles are upturned in that the 'host' does not host the meal because it is facilitated by trained WDP volunteers, and does not provide the food as it is a shared potluck meal in which everyone brings a dish. We were taught in the facilitators' workshop that the potluck was important in making newly arrived Australians feel respected because they can take a little bit of themselves and their culture and the dinner process would be facilitated so that everyone's food could be fully appreciated. We were also told that the potluck style enabled a range of people from different backgrounds to host dinners because no one person had to pay for the food. It also takes away the obligation to reciprocate with another dinner which is often central to dinner invitations and their ties and obligations (Crowther 2013, Julier 2013). The potluck enables people to bring dishes they will like, and help themselves to as much or as little of dishes as they want, reducing anxieties and formalities (Wise 2011). Thus, it avoids the more formal practices of being served and the obligation to eat everything.

The WDP's concept of the potluck is in line with food studies writers who note: a potluck meal produces more egalitarian relations than other forms of meals because the preparing, shopping, budgeting and cooking, and cleaning up are distributed across the guests and not allocated to a single host (Crowther 2013, Julier 2013, Wise 2011). Thus, the usual ways in which dishes are influenced – by local cuisine, host tastes, guest needs – are over-ruled in favour of surprise, experimentation and sharing. The potluck food's symbolism of informality extends to the rest of the dining material culture – type of utensils, cutlery, seating, table decoration – at the home dinner, because mixed utensils from tupperware containers to boxes are all placed on the table and seating arrangements are a mix of dining chairs, sofas and beanbags.

The WDP facilitators' workshop teaches the trainee facilitators new knowledge practices about how to plan, prepare and run a food event in such a way that it becomes food hospitality activism rather than just a shared meal. Much of this entails: (a) teaching attendees about the informal table manners of helping oneself to food, and eating away from the table, and in particular, (b) paying attention to the forms of sociality and atmosphere the WDP wishes to animate. The training emphasises that all attendees and the host will need to experiment not only with eating but with forms of sociality, particularly in terms of conventional social niceties and small talk. Certain topics are seen as inhospitable and unwelcoming. Thus, the WDP workshop teaches facilitators to induct the attendees in new ways to make conversation:

So, we have two rules but ...we ask you as facilitators to put out those rules in a way that's an invitation rather than a demand. The invitation is this:

‘for us to have a conversation that's a breath of fresh air. So we're going to invite you not to talk about where we work or to ask people where they work or how they came to Australia. If someone gives you that information that's fine but we're not going to ask it...This is an invitation to have a different kind

of conversation tonight. So we ask you not to ask people how they came to Australia or where they work.’

Thus, WDP seeks to create relations and feelings of commonality, not difference through the topics of conversations. Unlike the diversity training Wilson studied with its focus on prejudice reduction, and discomforting emotions, the WDP draws on a humanism that encourages imaginative, affective connections that transcend difference. It acknowledges that people may have different, and uneven economic, emotional, ethnic, faith and cultural resources but wants to highlight possibilities for an inter-subjectivity across these. Of course, such a view can be subject to critique for erasing racialised power differentials, histories of racial antagonism and racism, but in this paper, we seek to understand what the WDP claims and how it operationalises these claims in its practices.

The WDP encourages these sociality experiments to disturb the conversational habits and norms of established Australians. The founder explained at the facilitators’ training that questioning about how people came to Australia is not appropriate for refugees because of Australia’s offshore detention policy for asylum seekers arriving by boat. The problem with the question about where people work is that it can cause embarrassment, especially for refugees who may not have a job. Such rules temporarily ask people to unsettle identities and hierarchies created by economic, social and economic capital. Whilst ‘artefacts of status’ may be evident in other ways through clothes, cars, jewellery and hobbies, the rule suspends the social embarrassment some people may feel (Hinchliffe 2010).

### **‘Introduce your dish’ activity**

The WDP invites attendees to experiment with various ways of getting to know people through planned and facilitated exercises. At the start of the dinner there is an

icebreaker in which people break into small groups, introduce their names and its historical and cultural meaning and a chosen passion such as an interest or hobby. At the end of the dinner, guests write their feelings about the event on a cardboard speech bubble and read them out. Finally there is a group photo and the voluntary exchange of contact details. Exercises with simple instructions are designed to be of short duration, involve everyone, be 'low risk' not traumatising, get people talking and mingling.

At the centre of the event are the commensal practices of eating, drinking and talking about the food. The facilitators' workshop taught the participants how to structure the home dinner event including the staging of the potluck. Thus, facilitators ensure dishes are arranged on a table and then after they have delivered a welcome to the event and run an icebreaker, they bring everyone round the table and acknowledge each dish in turn by asking who made it. Each person is asked to talk to their dish, and why they brought it, ideally through a connection to personal history or culture. It is an activity designed to encourage people to talk, even if their English is not fluent, to tell brief autobiographic stories and/or showcase their cultural culinary knowledge and skills.

Facilitators are asked to ensure that everyone has enough cutlery and drinks, to oversee conversations and re-direct them if people seem uncomfortable, and to encourage everyone to participate. Hence, they perform typical emotional and communication labour of 'hostessing' (Veijola and Jokinen, 2008; Swan and Flowers 2015). An important part of the facilitators' hostessing role is to signal different stages of the event and move attendees through these comfortably. Using anthropological theories of liminality, William Beeman (2014) suggests that structured meals with invited guests have predictable ritual stages – processes of commensality - which transition people from the outside world to the commensal event. Thus, the facilitators

‘passage’ people through the front door across ‘threshold’ into the home, towards a ‘gathering place’ such as the kitchen, where everyone makes small talk and then to the liminal place of the table. Facilitators have to announce and signal different stages of social action: for example, they make a verbal or non-verbal ‘summons to the table’ and an announcement that the meal has begun. The WDP handbooks advise how to eat a potluck as it may be new to some people and to prompt participants to commence eating with a phrase like ‘dig in’!

As mentioned, individuals are asked to bring a dish because of the potluck style of commensality and its production of more egalitarian relations. The guests prepare their dishes at home or buy them. There is not much emphasis placed on what food or dish to bring. Thus, there are no requirements to attend to healthy, ethical or vegetarian food. Before the stage of eating or commensality, everyone in turn is asked by the facilitator to introduce their dish in one of the key facilitated activities. Usually this takes around 2-3 minutes per person and around 25% of the whole event all told. Using our fieldnotes, we describe one such activity at a home dinner.

After ten minutes, everyone has arrived:

- Thirteen adult guests – two Persian men in their 40s; one Middle Eastern woman in her 50s; one Australian Macedonian man in his 60s; a Canadian Australian woman and her partner, a white Australian man, both in their 50s; two international students from the Philippines in their 20s and an Australian-Filipino in her 30s; two white Australian women in their late thirties, one of them with her daughter, in her late teens; and the other with five white young Australian children aged 4-10.
- The two hosts are an Asian Australian woman and a white Australian man, both in their late 20s.
- The two facilitators are white Australian women, one in her late twenties and one in her thirties.

Isabelle, one of the facilitators and a youth worker, calls us together, and welcomes us. Isabelle kicked off by thanking the hosts for opening up their house. She does a formal acknowledgement of the local Aboriginal people. She explains there are rules such as not talking about work and not asking where people come from.

Various non-alcoholic drinks in hand, having chatted away, after about 20 minutes into the event, Isabelle calls us together and asks us to congregate around the dining table. The table is heaving with dishes – a huge plate of glistening Iranian rice, brightly coloured Indian carrot dessert, fresh fruit salad, sticky sweet Filipino cassava, and other dishes that are more ambiguous. The hosts have gone to considerable effort laying a clean white table cloth, serving cutlery, glasses and seating close to the table. It is a feast and we feel hungry and excited about what we will sample and eat. We all move around the table in a higgledy-piggledy circle. The table is rectangular and takes up much of the open plan kitchen/ dining space.

Isabelle quietly requests that each of us introduce our dish: ‘what’s in them and why you brought your dish. Maybe it’s associated with your family or a celebration.’ People hesitate to begin. Someone starts. Sometimes Isabelle invites someone in with a nod of the head or points to a dish and says, who brought this? Most people describe what is in their dish and some add a cultural story. People murmur approval and on occasions, for instance the Persian rice dish and the Indian carrot cake, oooh and ahhh, and admire the food and the skills of the cooks. Newly arrived people bring more generous dishes than established Australians. For example, two men who identify as Persian, brought a large Tajin with saffron coloured rice and explain this has taken several hours to prepare; people mention enthusiastically they can smell walnut oil and pomegranates. By contrast, a white couple – a Canadian and an Australian confess that the fruit salad they have brought was quickly cobbled together. People don’t ask questions but instead murmur, coo, smile, peer more closely to show approval and gratitude. Around 30 minutes later, just under a quarter of the time of the whole dinner event, Isabelle invites us to help ourselves. The whole group look like they can’t wait to dig in with ‘gustatory relish’ (Wise 2011)!

As can be seen, the introducing your dish activity is a ritualised exercise which encourages low-key participation through the sharing of stories – cultural, ethnic and/or



culinary. The facilitators model in verbal and bodily fashion – with exclamations, eye contact, nodding and pointing - an appreciation of participants’ culinary skills, and exercise care and attention for people for whom English is not their first language.

Social scientists emphasise how commensality is a social ritual which entails exchange and produces relations through cultural rules of eating etiquette and commensal practices (Beeman 2014, Crowther 2013). An important social dynamic in the *Welcome Dinner* is that ‘strangers’ are brought into homes. Mary Douglas argues that meals identify boundaries, inclusions and exclusions: those who belong and those who do not belong, with drinks given to strangers and workmen, and meals for close friends, family and special guests (1997). Meals express friendship. The sharing of stories presages the sharing of food. The linguistic act of everyone introducing the food in turn, and everyone listening closely marks the passage from ‘the public outside to the intimate inside’ and reduces the gaps, hierarchy and social differences between people, however temporarily (Beeman 2014, p. 33). The activity enables everyone to ‘approach the table in relative state of social comfort’ (p. 33).

The activity does ‘pre-liminality preparation’ for the liminality of the commensal act of eating, but has particular resonance given the presence of the Other and their food (Beeman 2014, p. 41). As Wise explains, the sharing of the Other’s food requires order and narrative connections to build trust and reduce cultural anxiety or fear. Eating the potluck at the dinner event calls for cultural and culinary experimentation given that most people are strangers to each other; some are minoritised strangers, and almost every participant will be faced with dishes that are new to them. Trying the dishes requires corporeal experimentation too. Hence, the act of coming to the table and eating constitutes the liminal event in which the usual social rules of who eats together, what food they eat, and who mixes with whom are

‘suspended’ and replaced with these experiments, new knowledge practices and ‘special observances’ (Beeman 2014). Thus, the introducing the dish activity can help prepare emotions and bodies for the commensal event, underlining how the dishes are gifts of labour and Otherness, and support the transformation of social relations, the creation of a sense of intercultural ‘we-ness’ and the feeling of *communitas* and pleasurable bonding (Wise 2011, Beeman 2014).

Of course, even with everyone’s keenness and orientation to learn and experiment, some dishes and people are less enthusiastically sampled. Some people and dishes are left to one side. In their study of eating migrant food, Robyn Longhurst and colleagues (2004) report how even though they as researchers wanted to try and like all the food served, their bodies betrayed them, and there were some dishes they just could not stomach. In reality, racialised relations are deeply complex, inflected by colonial histories and individual biographies which produce bodily encounters inflected by racism, anxiety, frustration and disjuncture (Ahmed 2004, Wilson 2013, Wise 2011). But the intent of the WDP and its facilitated activity is to try to pre-empt or mediate these impressions.

At the facilitator’s training workshop, the WDP founder who was the lead trainer, explained the purpose of the exercise:

We haven't asked people to actually share their name or where they're from in the group. They've actually introduced their food. But we just found out a lot about that person from the story they told us about their dish. So it's kind of a nice way, that's not quite so confronting if you like, to find out something about each person right at the beginning. So they introduce their dish rather than themselves. But actually, they're introducing themselves in a way as well.

She tells us more about the aim of the activity.

It's the role of the lead facilitator to get everyone to stand around the table, around the food and to start the process that way. We just find - we've been doing it at every welcome dinner, the same process, and it works really really well. It's just such a nice way to start off. To focus on the food is just a lovely way to begin. It's not confronting. Everyone is excited about trying everyone else's food. I think people who have been here and have been so isolated and felt like they're not making any contribution to anyone else in our society, for people to actually be really interested in their food and to be wanting to try something that they've made means a lot. There's just that feeling of contributing something that means something to other people. That's very simple but at the same time it can mean a lot.

The WDP founder emphasises the excitement and 'gustatory relish' experienced at the dinners but also stresses how some newly arrived Australians can feel a sense of recognition and egalitarianism through how their dishes are treated. Whilst this could be seen as a patronising gesture, the violence and racism experienced by some refugees in detention camps cannot be under-estimated and thus, kindness and interest, albeit temporary and short-lived can be important. In sum then, the activity prior to the commensal event of eating food, acts as the final stage of transition to the liminal relations of food intimacy and sharing, in which people move from being invited strangers to become 'equal' participants. Fraught with social and bodily risks, the activity and the sharing of food works to connect people, and as Wise notes, 'incorporating the other into a situation of conviviality which broadens [everyone's] community to incorporate the other' (2011, p. 99). The meal then marks the transformation of social relations, and for the WDP, like the Outward Bound courses, the liminal space of commensality works as a metaphor for a different kind of Australia in which everyone is welcome.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we respond to the call for papers of this special issue, by presenting the WDP, a community organisation which undertakes food hospitality activism. We argue that it is helpful to closely analyse the exercises run as part of the dinner and explore how facilitated activities can be understood as rituals which enable embodied, cognitive, affective experimentation and new knowledge practices. We augment this with theorising about everyday multiculturalism, particularly studies of positive intercultural food sharing. Whilst everyday multiculturalism is not designed, planned or facilitated as intercultural pedagogies, Wise suggests that an intercultural potluck dinner involves experimentation. And the work of Beeman shows home dinners with invited guests are designed and staged, deploying spaces of liminality and practices of transformative relations. We show how the conversational rules and activities encouraged social and embodied experimentation. These can as our observations and interviews suggest produce a temporary sense of embodied connection, we-ness and learning through the collective sharing of food, stories, and feelings, and the liminality of the activities and the commensal event.

There are questions about the effects of the events on attendees and wider racist politics in Australia. The aim of this paper, however, is to examine the aims of facilitator-led activities. In relation to the question about wider effect, the WDP offers attendees a one-off event with fleeting connections. It expects people at the events to follow up, by running their own events, or by connecting in other ways. Hence, the WDP creates a pop-up 'pedagogical space' and potential for experimenting with sociality and food sharing. Indeed, scholars question the longevity and wider resonances of such projects. Moreover, both Gillian Valentine (2008) and Christina Ho (2011)

question whether everyday multicultural acts of neighbourly exchange is equivalent to respect for difference and are ‘scaled up beyond the moment’ (Valentine 2008, p. 334).

But another way to look at this is that the temporary, fleeting, experimental and short-term has its place, and can create helpful effects through liminal relations and experimental sociality (Collins 2004). As stated at the outset of this paper, our aim has not been to analyse the learning outcomes or effects of the project but rather to discuss the design and meaning of facilitated activities in the micro-contexts of the dinners. Nonetheless, our interviews with home dinner participants do suggest that the dinners and their facilitation were experienced as helpful, meaningful, warm, and to varying degrees, significant. From quite different perspectives, Wise (2011), Eve Giraud (2015) and Jenny Molz (2012) also argue that ephemeral socialities across difference can be still experienced as intense, consequential and significant.

We should not, however, ignore the uneven distribution of emotional, economic and social capital in the events. Sara Ahmed (2004) suggests that emotions are unevenly distributed in social encounters, including we add in pedagogical spaces and homes, such that racialised minorities may be experienced as unfriendly, frightening or threatening. She shows how impressions based on collective past histories, colonialism and individual biographies create antagonistic bodily senses of proximity and strangerliness which are difficult to control or resist, processes which we have explored elsewhere in relation multiculturalism and ethnic food tours (Swan and Flowers 2018). In this paper, we are concerned with the WDP intentions, and the ‘experimental set up’ of their food hospitality activism through their training and activities and ways they try to mediate such impressions (Hinchcliffe 2000). Our future work will explore more fully the experiences of and effects on those that attend, and possible wider social impact of the WDP.

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